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# Humanitarian Response Coordination and Cooperation in Nepal

COPING WITH CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS



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Faculteit  
der Sociale  
Wetenschappen

## Introduction and summary

On Saturday the 25th of April 2015, Nepal was hit by a massive earthquake, measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale. This event was followed a mere 17 days later by another major earthquake, which came in as 7.3 on the scale. This paper is based on field research in Kathmandu, Nuwakot and Rasuwa, four weeks after the second earthquake struck. It is part of the research embedded in the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) funded project Smart Disaster Governance, conducted by VU University Amsterdam in close collaboration with, among others, Cordaid and Oxfam-Novib.<sup>1</sup>

In this white paper we give a first impression of the dilemmas and challenges of the humanitarian response we faced in Nepal. The focus is on *coordination* (i.e. the synchronization of actions) and *cooperation* (i.e. the working together) between the various responding organizations and governmental bodies. Governing response to a disaster is complex and difficult, since professional response organizations are heterogeneous, while at the same time they have to coordinate their actions and collaborate with other organizations and local communities.<sup>2</sup> The response to the Nepal earthquake was no exception. In this paper we try to understand two specific dilemmas we encountered in Nepal, and argue that the dilemmas pertain to underlying disaster governance challenges.

The first dilemma involves *top-down versus emergent coordination*. The humanitarian response organizations in Nepal had to find a balance between established coordination mechanisms implemented by UNOCHA to support coordination efforts between various NGOs, and local emergent response initiatives. The second dilemma involves *imposed versus optional cooperation*. The responding relief organizations were inclined to work with local (governmental) organizations and communities, but faced the problem that local government officials and emergent leaders were stretched beyond the limits of their capacity to respond to the crisis. Besides, their political agendas further challenged cooperation.

These dilemmas triggered two important disaster governance issues: 1) seeking a balance between local and imposed steering mechanisms, and 2) aligning the various steering mechanisms during the different phases of the disaster. We provide recommendations for alternative disaster governance mechanisms, as a way to strengthen future relief effort: coordination through interpretation, the use of narratives and reflective leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> NWO project Enhancing smart disaster governance: Assessing the potential of the net-centric approach. See for a summary of the approach: Boersma, F.K., J. Ferguson, P. Groenewegen and J. Wolbers (2014). Beyond the Myth of Control: toward network switching in disaster management. In: *Proceedings of the 11th International ISCRAM Conference* – Penn State, S.R. Hiltz, M.S. Pfaff, L. Plotnick, and A.C. Robinson (eds).

<sup>2</sup> Drabek, T. E., & McEntire, D. A. (2002). Emergent phenomena and multiorganizational coordination in disasters: Lessons from the research literature. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 20(2): 197-224; Comfort, L. K., Dunn, M., Johnson, D., Skertich, R., & Zagorecki, A. (2004). Coordination in complex systems: increasing efficiency in disaster mitigation and response. *International Journal of Emergency Management*, 2(1-2): 62-80.





*Picture 1. Impression of the damage.*



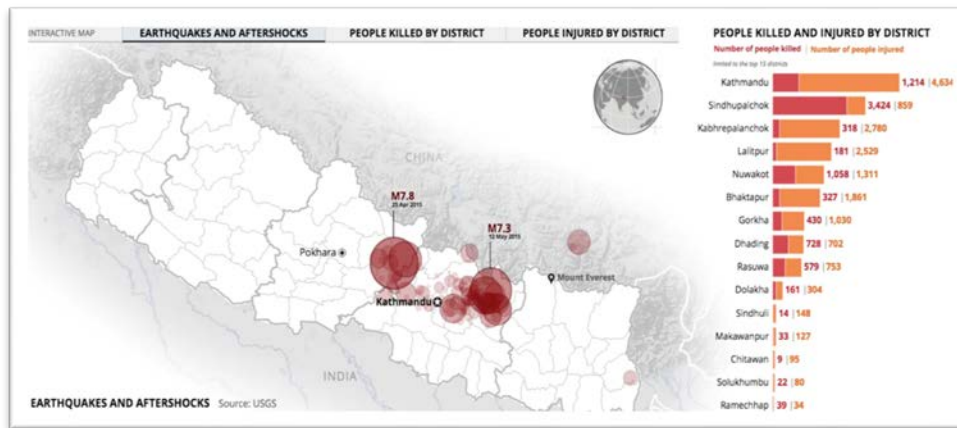
*Picture 2. Organizational humanitarian response.*



*Picture 3. Coordination efforts.*

## Background

On Saturday the 25th of April 2015, Nepal was hit by a massive earthquake, measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale. This event was followed a mere 17 days later by another major earthquake, which came in as 7.3 on the scale. The epicentres of the two earthquakes and the number of casualties by district is shown in the picture below.



Picture 4. Source: <http://data.unhcr.org/nepal/images/thumbnail.jpg>

A team of five academics went to Nepal four weeks later in order to carry out field-based research into the humanitarian response. Our specific research interests include coordination, information sharing, ICT and logistics. Our team consisted of people from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), the University of Tilburg and the University of Agder.

This white paper is generated by the *Smart Disaster Governance* research team based at VU. The *Smart Disaster Governance* project is a NWO (Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research) project that is being conducted in close collaboration with partner organizations, including Oxfam-Novib and Cordaid.

We carried out fieldwork consisting of *on site* research in Kathmandu and the Nuwakot and Rasuwa regions, in close collaboration with locally based agencies.<sup>3</sup> Fieldwork involved interviewing, observing and shadowing people involved in the response. We primarily spoke with people based at multilateral agencies and (I)NGOs. As such, this paper primarily reflects their perspectives. We complemented our field data with online sources (such as ACAPS and ALNAP). People based at the following organizations contributed their time to our research during our visit:

- Multilateral agencies: UNOCHA; IOM; WFP.
- Nepali branches of INGOs: Oxfam; Cordaid; IFRC; ICRC; World Vision; Handicap International; Islamic Relief; IsraAID; Transparency International; Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission; SOS Children's Villages; Humedica.
- Nepal based NGOs: Kathmandu Living Labs (KLL); United Mission to Nepal; Nepal Red Cross Society.
- Local government: Nuwakot and Rasuwa District Administration Offices.

<sup>3</sup> This research project conforms to the AAA Code of Ethics. This means that the information respondents provide is treated confidentially, is anonymized where appropriate, is not used for individual interest, and is presented accurately.

## Top-down versus emergent coordination

***Top-down coordination without a clearly defined common goal may lead to 'coordination neglect' and needless overhead.***

Coordination mechanisms enforced on NGOs without 'translating' objectives to the field may contribute to a situation whereby different partners only communicate about the division of labour, but fail to communicate how their outputs fit together into a coherent whole. In this way, coordination mechanisms take up precious time and resources, and thereby limit NGOs' flexibility to form the most strategically useful partnerships in the moment.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster in Nepal, a number of formal coordination mechanisms were activated. Indeed, this is common practice when a major disaster strikes for which interactional assistance is requested. Given the importance of coordination at times of an emergency, the UN General Assembly has rolled out a formal system to facilitate this process, dating far back to 1991. This system is managed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). In addition to the UN system, other formal mechanisms exist in Nepal to facilitate coordination such as the NGO federation of Nepal, which has local branches or 'chapters', and which brings together both national and international NGOs working in the same geographical area. At the local level, government run District Disaster Response Committees also aim to enable coordination between the work of different humanitarian actors.



Picture 5. UNOCHA Cluster meeting in Kathmandu.

Humanitarian organizations tend to identify and choose suitable partners to work with through the UNOCHA cluster system<sup>4</sup> – as well as through other established networks. If national authorities require assistance with the management of a large-scale humanitarian response, UNOCHA activates a number of relevant groups or 'clusters', each focusing on a different top-level area of humanitarian importance, such as health and shelter. These clusters function as points of contact for different international humanitarian actors working in these fields. It also provides them with a clear physical – and also virtual – space to get together, learn about each other's plans and activities and potentially partner or coordinate their activities.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.alnap.org/what-we-do/leadership-coordination>



Next to the UNCOHA cluster system, however, various (new) governance structures have been put in place in Nepal. These are not always in line with or aligned to the cluster system, as we encountered for instance during a meeting of the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) in Kathmandu that we were invited to attend. The DRA, a coalition of twelve humanitarian organizations with links to the Netherlands, is a relatively new consortium, including Dutch NGOs and Dutch branches of international NGOs, and set up in April 2015, just before the first earthquake struck Nepal.<sup>5</sup> The DRA demands coordination with a specific set of partners as a precondition for accessing funding from the Dutch government, and in that respect differs from other existing coordination mechanisms, which may demand coordination with the local government or local NGOs as a precondition for access. However, the DRA does provide INGOs with freedom and flexibility to choose with whom they wish to cooperate.

The Dutch government provided the following rationale for the creation of this new coordination mechanism:

*Due to the piling up of crises the need for emergency relief is greater than ever. This means that all parties involved should cooperate better and that there should be no room for competition between organizations. This facility has been created to prioritize the victims of humanitarian disasters over organizational interests...*

Lilianne Ploumen, Minister for Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade

This request made sense from the perspective of the Dutch government, which noted that it provided funding to a number of NGOs that were all working in the same geographical areas, and which all addressed the same or similar issues. Furthermore, following a number of high profile media scandals that plagued the Dutch NGO sector, the government was also faced with the need to address a growing scepticism and distrust among Dutch citizens about how their donations or tax euros were being spent. The creation of a formal coordination mechanism through which NGOs funded by the Dutch government had to work together seemed to address these points well.

However, whilst the request for Dutch NGOs to coordinate as a consortium was appropriate for the Dutch context, our impression was that it made less sense in the context of post-earthquake Nepal, because its members were already working together – and with others – through other established coordination mechanisms.

*What more can you do in coordination when there are already coordination systems in place? ... We are all in different clusters, we are all coordinating side by side attending meetings. So the Dutch Relief Alliance should really add value... We need to link back to the DRA in the Netherlands in order to find out what, according to them, this added value is.*

Attendees at a DRA meeting in Kathmandu, 24.06.2015

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2015/08/01/beleidsdoorlichting-humanitaire-hulp-2009-2014>

We observed that coalition members in Nepal had to invest significant time and effort into interpreting and making sense of the DRA's request. They proactively brainstormed ideas about how to create added value as a DRA and came up with useful ideas, such as peer monitoring and sharing success stories. Whilst this added value for NGOs as a way to learn from each other and build on each other's strengths, their efforts to make sense of and implement the request 'to coordinate' also appeared to result in a lot of overhead; time that could have been spent on building ties and creating alliances that seemed most strategically useful and pertinent to the situation at hand.

This example signposts a lack of communication between the Netherlands and Nepal, and a failure to establish clearly beforehand what coordinating 'as a DRA' should entail in a context where the relevant INGOs are already coordinating their work through other mechanisms. It also suggests *coordination neglect* between the DRA in the Netherlands and the DRA in Nepal – a term that refers to the situation whereby different partners work in different contexts communicate about the division of labour but fail to communicate how their outputs should fit together into a coherent whole.<sup>6</sup> A common problem in communication that can lead to coordination neglect, which we also found here, is the failure to 'translate' what is wanted in terms of coordination into language that makes sense to people with a different professional background and who are working in a different context.

While final conclusions about the usefulness of DRA as a local coordination mechanism in the Nepal context are premature, it is worth asking whether it makes sense to ask Dutch – and only Dutch – NGOs to work together in an international setting that requires cooperation between a range of local, national and international actors. By demanding that Dutch NGOs spend their limited time and resources on finding ways to make cooperation with their compatriots meaningful, the Dutch government unintentionally reduced the impetus and space that Dutch NGOs needed to proactively build relationships with other INGOs, national organizations and local communities. This top-down imposed coordination with compatriots clearly did not stop members of the DRA from working with other partners through different mechanisms. However, it did constitute yet another pressure on the organizations' time and resources and incentivized partnering on the basis of a shared foreign nationality, rather than on the basis of direct local involvement or strengthening local capacities.

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<sup>6</sup> This refers to the common situation whereby different actors work in different contexts, don't communicate adequately and as a result produce outputs that don't fit together into a coherent whole. For a discussion of the topic see: Heath, C., & Staudenmayer, N. (2000). Coordination neglect: How lay theories of organizing complicate coordination in organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 22, 153-191.

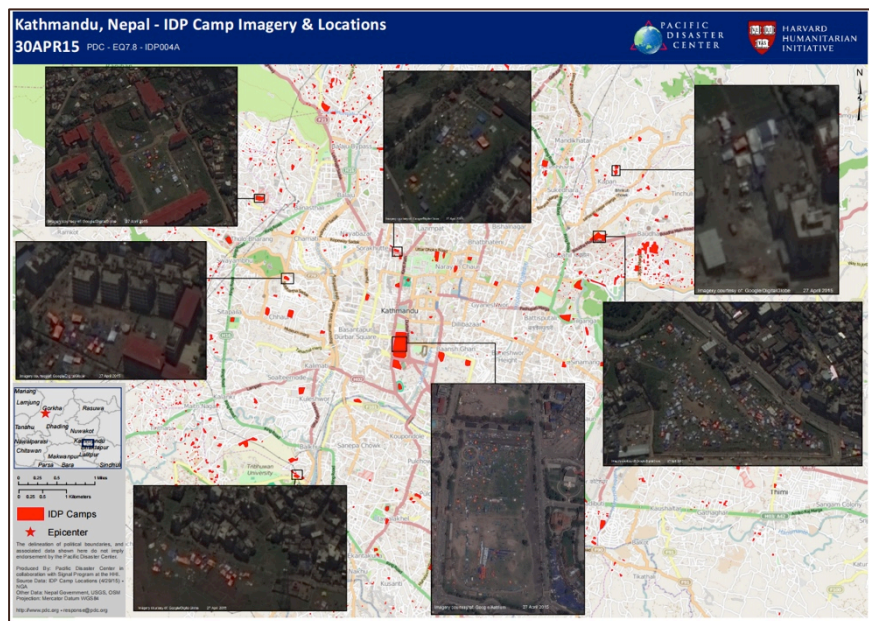


## Imposed versus optional cooperation

### ***Providing humanitarian aid to IDP camps may change the political landscape***

There is a strong humanitarian imperative to provide internally displaced people (IDPs) with aid. However, IDP camps may attract refugees from external districts. This is a politically sensitive issue in Nepal because the influence of different parties within the coalition government is based on the number of regions that each party controls. As such, the cross-district movement of large numbers of people with different political affiliations can significantly alter the political balance.

Refugees and/or internally displaced people (IDPs) are often thought of as people fleeing from conflict and persecution. However, this perception is likely to change in the near future when more and more people are likely to become forcibly displaced as a result of the expected increase in the rate of natural disasters.<sup>7</sup> Prior to the 2015 earthquakes, Nepal already counted 50,000 IDPs who had left their homes as a result of the armed conflict and 83,000 IDPs who had fled as a result of previous disasters. This problem was greatly exacerbated by the earthquakes in April and May 2015.



Picture 6. IDP camps present in Kathmandu 5 days after the first earthquake. (source: Harvard Humanitarian Initiative)

Picture 6 above shows the number of IDP camps that emerged in Kathmandu in the immediate aftermath of the first earthquake. At present, environmentally displaced persons are not adequately covered by the international protection regimes that were set up for refugees and IDPs, like a IOM representative explained: *"in the aftermath of a disaster little attention is being paid to the rights of these displaced people"*.

<sup>7</sup> It has been noted that urban informal settles in camps is a challenge for (and sometimes threat to) local governments. For example: <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/publications/2015/201506-global-urban-informal-settlers.pdf>

During our research mission to Nepal, we learned that district authorities and NGOs were both involved in attempts at managing and providing services for IDPs. From our discussions with humanitarian actors it became clear that, whilst their efforts to aid IDPs were intended to be apolitical, their actions had the opposite effect. The government of Nepal was naturally concerned about the emergence of IDP camps, in particular in Kathmandu. Not only were they worried that the camps might change into permanent settlements without facilities, they were also concerned about the political implications at the local and national levels.

Given that a party's political power in the coalition government is determined by the number of geographical areas it controls, the movement of large numbers of IDPs that 'belong' to a particular party into a new area can change regional political control – and thereby the amount of influence that parties have at the national level. By providing services to IDP camps, humanitarian agencies were thus unintentionally changing the political landscape: by helping people in need – without discriminating against them on the basis of political affiliation – they risked drawing in more refugees from areas that 'belonged' to other political parties, enabling the creation of long-term informal settlements.



Picture 7. Temporal settlement in Kathmandu.

Displacement is a phenomenon that is usually highly politicized. In fact, given that the rights of environmental IDPs are not explicitly addressed in international legal norms and institutional arrangements for dealing with forced displacement, these people are rendered all the more vulnerable.

*All governments hate camps. They fear camps, because they think camps, if they, they think all these NGOs will come here and start providing services and help to those people they will never go away and now I have this informal, what is now a temporary settlement will be become a permanent one without an infrastructure. It's the beginning of something that can be very complicated. The way we talk with government partners throughout the world - is the push and pull factor.*

IOM representative

The decision to create – or tolerate – camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) is usually made for pragmatic reasons: people in need require assistance and the most efficient way of organizing this logistically is by 'housing' them all in one physical location. Nevertheless, the emergence of such camps is often a politically sensitive issue.

There is a real risk that camps – erected for temporary purposes – become semi-permanent installations. Furthermore, convening people from different backgrounds together in one camp can result in tensions. However, in Nepal the political implications extend well beyond this.

*The one thing that is also a problem here in Nepal - and I am sure you've heard - is that the political structure is quite weak because it is a coalition government. There haven't been elections. This means that each geographic unit, each VDC [village development committee] belongs to a party. If you move people from one place to another you are actually changing voting intentions. And that has a HUGE [emphasizes] political agenda that we definitely don't want to be involved with. So basically this, my village belongs to a certain party. If you come to my village we are increasing their power because it is about representation. Yeah, so there is no election, so right, it's not really about the bulletin. It's that geographical.*

IOM representative

Thus, when communities of IDPs moved across district borders they upset the political balance in that region, signifying a clear political problem. Nevertheless, providing assistance to IDPs is a strong humanitarian imperative, given their vulnerability. For instance, we visited Nepal just before the monsoon season; the impending rains posed an enormous threat to the wellbeing of the displaced people living in camps. We learned that Cordaid, in consultation with the local authorities, had made the decision to provide aid to IDP camps in Rasuwa and Nuwakot districts.

*But look at the people who are living in the river belt. Those are the IDPs coming from the north. While going to Dhunche I have seen how much is the devastation in their villages. The lands are cracked, the mountains have fallen apart and the rivers are swollen. They can be isolated at any time. Fearing in the monsoon that the mountains may fall and kill them, they have decided to migrate to the riverbanks. We talked to the people, and there are a lot of problems actually, because these people of around 300 households are living there. There are no sanitation facilities, there are no toilets, and there is no drinking water. The situation is very filthy and the monsoon is coming next. There may be Cholera if the water is not cleaned.*

Cordaid representative

Furthermore, IDP camps present an opportunity to (I)NGOs to channel aid and recovery assistance toward people who are among the most vulnerable in society. This is because people who have the means to seek shelter elsewhere generally do not choose to enter or remain in such camps. Thus, generally speaking only those who lack the assets and social networks that would enable them to set up a (temporary) life elsewhere tend to remain in such camps. As such, a deliberate targeting of these camps by (I)NGOs would enable them to reach the poorest and most marginalized households in a country.<sup>8</sup>

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8 Anderson, M. B., & Woodrow, P. J. (1998). *Rising from the ashes: development strategies in times of disaster*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder London.

## Seeking a balance between local and imposed steering mechanisms

### ***Groups that are absent from official registers may also get excluded from relief programs***

Vulnerable communities may never have formally registered their existence with local government bodies and, as such, be absent from official records. As a result, those most in need may not be present on the lists of potential beneficiaries that local governments provide to NGOs for the distribution of relief goods. Local authorities often don't notice – or prioritize – this issue because their capacity to respond to the crisis is already stretched to the limit.

In order to govern the tension between local and imposed steering mechanisms humanitarian agencies cooperate closely with local official and emergent political structures, such as local authorities and (in)formal community leaders. The problem is that these local government officials and emergent leaders are generally stretched to the limit in their efforts to respond to the crisis at hand and, as such, lack the capacity to critically examine their actions and decisions for bias and blind spots.

*[The monitoring officer] was in the field, she was in fact checking the beneficiary list [provided by the Village Development Committee] on ethnicity and she said that some people are missing here. Then she started to ask where are these people? Oh no, they are living there. Ah, and then she went over. And she asked people around there, "is this distribution ongoing?" and the people [the untouchables] were not even aware. So this traditional communication system does not always work perfectly. It's the automatic exclusion mechanism. "Oh", they said. Excluded by default.*

Oxfam representative

Nepal is currently ranked 145 on the Human Development Index<sup>9</sup>, which is a clear indication that its government has limited financial and technical capabilities. A disaster of the magnitude recently faced by Nepal thus puts tremendous pressure on already strained local and national government bodies. Local authorities faced the challenge of ensuring that all affected families registered in their district received their fair share of aid.



*Picture 8. Inhabitants of the Nuwakot valley lining up for registration.*

<sup>9</sup> <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>



One problem local government faced in this context was that a significant number of families attempted to ‘game the system’ in order to access more assistance than they were strictly entitled to. Given that aid was generally distributed per household, after the earthquake a significant proportion of households claimed to be multiple smaller households so as to receive the same allowance multiple times.

*Yeah, the whole district there is divided into many sections. We call them VDCs - Village Development Committees. So we got permission from seven VDCs and we worked through four partners and that was about...in the beginning it was about 7,000 households and then it increased up to 9,000 households and by the time we are done it's more than 10,000 households.... It kept increasing...*

Representative United Mission to Nepal

Furthermore, some people who had moved away from their district of origin decades ago and settled somewhere else returned ‘home’ in order to claim assistance there – even if their current house and livelihood had not been badly affected. Faced with such attempts at fraud, some local district officials sought to closely manage and control the distribution of aid by (I)NGOs, insisting that only registered households who could present identity cards be included in lists of potential beneficiaries. However, because vulnerable households – those most in need – are frequently absent from official government records, this approach posed quite a problem.

*The system that has been put in place I feel is quite wrong because of registration. So, the list is generated by the [Village Development Committee's] secretary and they present it to the NGOs and then the NGOs uses that as the basis for distribution. But we have tried to move a step ahead and verify the list, I mean, and say, “okay, out of this general list you’ve presented, who are the most vulnerable, who, where are they,” - trying to factor in the inclusion, the general inclusion of everybody into the system. And it always proves to become quite a challenge to do such a hard talk because, “no no no we cannot allow you to do this. We need to do it our way or there’s always going to be push back.” So, there’s always a bit of a fight to make sure all this happens right.*

Oxfam representative

The example illustrates how local organizational structures – and the formal records they create – tend to embody or even reinforce local socio-economic inequalities and exclusions. Indeed, some households and communities had never formally registered their existence, and local government bodies – stretched to the limit by their effort to respond to the crisis – did not prioritize or even notice their absence from the official lists used to distribute aid. This clearly constituted a major blind spot and was a problem for NGOs that wanted to aid those who were most vulnerable.

*Yeah, and then the overall aspect of, like, from a humanitarian point of view, I would say that there's a problem that has to be addressed but then the authorities wouldn't see it as a problem. So like, for instance, the exclusion of those people, based on the social construct, that's a problem for me because these are really vulnerable people and the people don't see it as a problem.*

Oxfam representative

This issue is sometimes addressed by complementing the data contained in official lists and registers with information provided directly by communities. In the aftermath of a disaster, many actors emerge to play a vital role in their community by providing advice, comfort and information on the community's needs. These emergent leaders may take on the role of focal points for humanitarian organizations, acting as information conduits and managing the relief efforts at the micro-level.

However, local communities are diverse and subject to change. As such, it is important to note that emergent leadership can also reflect local socio-economic inequalities and exclusions. Emergent local leaders may not represent – or have knowledge of – the needs and circumstances of all groups that live in 'their' area.

In addition, the work carried out by (I)NGOs in areas struck by disaster may not only reflect the local biases of the local power structures through which they operate, but also the priorities of their institutional and private donors.<sup>10</sup> At times of crisis these priorities are – at least in part – shaped by the focus of the international media. When this happens (I)NGOs find themselves under tremendous pressure to show and be seen how they are responding to the crisis. We noted that in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake in Nepal, the attention of the media was focused primarily on the Kathmandu Valley areas. Indeed, at the time of our research visit, four weeks after the second earthquake, we found that most aid and assistance had been targeted at this area – even though the rural areas adjacent to the Kathmandu valley had been affected far worse.<sup>11</sup> In fact: some of the worst hit villages had not yet received much assistance at all.

Our fieldwork experiences indicate that while governing the tension between local and imposed steering mechanisms, it is important to address both the resilience and vulnerabilities in these remote local communities. Collaborating with local communities is necessary for developing insight into their needs, but at the same time this approach risks replicating the local power imbalances and inequalities that are present in the community itself. Thus, in order to provide inclusive relief to these communities, recognizing and acting on both local resilience and vulnerabilities is a crucial step for governing the tension between local and imposed steering mechanisms.

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<sup>10</sup> Koch, D. J., Dreher, A., Nunnenkamp, P., & Thiele, R. (2009). Keeping a low profile: what determines the allocation of aid by non-governmental organizations?. *World development*, 37(5), 902-918.

<sup>11</sup>[https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/assessments/150515\\_nepal\\_situation\\_analysis\\_osocc\\_assessmente\\_cell\\_-\\_final\\_final.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/assessments/150515_nepal_situation_analysis_osocc_assessmente_cell_-_final_final.pdf)

## Influencing the phase of disaster governance

### ***A national government may use its legal powers to shift the focus of humanitarian assistance***

Two months after the second earthquake, the government of Nepal decided to formally change the phase of the humanitarian response from 'relief' to 'recovery'. As part of this move, they ended the duty free period for humanitarian goods. This greatly influenced what and how much NGOs could import and therefore what they could do in their efforts to respond to the crisis.

During our visit to Nepal, we found that one of the most pressing governance dilemmas in the earthquake response – that affected the humanitarian community as a whole – was triggered by the government decision to move from the response phase to the recovery phase. A disaster response is often divided into four different phases: preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. These phases signal what responders tend to focus on in their relief efforts. The government had purposefully used its power to frame the legal and policy context and restrict what humanitarian agencies could do in an attempt to gain the lead in the humanitarian response efforts. The government justified its decision on the basis of a well-established narrative about the resilience of local communities in Nepal, expressing a concern about people becoming reliant on aid. Talking with representatives from a number of INGOs and intergovernmental organizations, (including the WFP, Oxfam, Cordaid and UNOCHA) we found that this decision had a clear and direct effect on the on-going response operations.

While seemingly neutral, the decision to move from one phase to the next signals a new disaster policy landscape in which different priorities are set and support is given. In the aftermath of the earthquakes in Nepal, the humanitarian response focused initially on search and rescue and subsequently on the distribution of relief materials, prioritizing the provisioning of shelter, food and safe water, amongst other things, to the affected communities.

However, after about one month the government took the decision to move into the recovery phase. This decision was taken in part to regain sovereign control over important socio-economic developments that were taking place in the country. The government had previously requested that all aid gifted to the country be channelled into a Prime Minister's Relief Fund so as to be able to manage these resources and ensure that they were used to support – and not to counter – Nepal's national relief and development priorities. It also tried to regulate the (new) responding NGOs by implementing registration system.

However, international humanitarian organizations are accountable to their own donors and as such need to control their funds. Therefore, they could not have complied with this request even if they had been strongly motivated to do so.

*Now the government has declared that the emergency response is over and we should get into redevelopment as of last Monday. So what they are doing is try to pull back the military forces they have put into the country, back to their normal day jobs. By the middle of July, in the next two weeks, it should be business as usual as much as possible.*

UNOCHA representative

*We respond to an appeal of the government, and that means that the government needs to be in the loop. Quite soon the government came and showed that they have that responsibility for the population and they want to take up that responsibility. The way that they wanted to do it was of course the question, because they created this Prime Minister's Relief Fund. They were hoping that all the donors would put their money there and they would do all the operations. And that did not work out because that is not how it always works in the emergency relief context. It's many organizations that use own funds.*

Oxfam representative

When the government officially announced the end of the relief phase it also ended the duty-free period for a specified list of humanitarian goods. Their reasoning was that corporations and humanitarian organizations misused the duty-free status of humanitarian relief materials. The Nepalese phone company Ncell, for example, was found guilty of importing telecom equipment from China in boxes stamped with the Red Cross logo, evading Rs10.1 million (€82,500) in tax payment. The company later acknowledged its dues and paid the outstanding import duty in full.<sup>12</sup>

*Initially there was nothing, everything was allowed to clear. But later on some elements did misuse of relief materials. In the name of relief materials they started importing so many other things what is not required for the relief, but may be required for their organization, but that is not the requirement of the relief. When such a thing the government started to collect import on a lot of things, and after that it became very, very difficult. You know, most of the agencies had brought genuine things, but they were also restricted because of a couple of organizations who did try to misuse this privilege. The initial month there was not much problem, but after that, after the first month the second month become very, very challenging for me.*

Representative World Food Programme



Picture 9. Relief products remaining to be claimed at the Kathmandu airport customs.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.npnewsportal.com/ncell-import-with-red-cross-stamps/>



At the time the government announced the official shift from the relief to the recovery phase, some remote communities had not yet received much aid or assistance to help them prepare for the imminent monsoons. The reinstatement of taxes on relief goods constituted a major obstacle to humanitarian organizations. It undermined the speed and effectiveness of humanitarian actors and thus significantly slowed down the ongoing response operations. This was especially troublesome as the recent earthquakes in Nepal had had their greatest impact in remote rural areas, not in the relatively easy to reach area of the Kathmandu valley. Reaching these remote communities constituted one of the greatest logistical challenges.

*Customs is probably the number one challenge of the humanitarian community at the moment. Because of the taxes and the delays at the borders and the airport of getting goods in but also having to pay duty and import duty of humanitarian goods, which should be free of that. So that is a big challenge. There have been countless meetings with government agencies to try to get that resolved. ... Although the government is saying the response is over the humanitarian community is very, very worried that the needs have not been met. There is a big need out there for shelter and a lot of other things. Many people haven't got anything yet, because they are so remote.*

UNOCHA representative

The government further justified its decision to change the formal phase of the response – and end the duty-free period for humanitarian goods – on the basis of a well-established narrative about the resilience of local communities in Nepal. The government expressed the concern that Nepal's highly resilient communities might become 'corrupted' by external aid, might lose their self-reliance and become dependent on external assistance. To harness the resilience of local communities, the government's message for the people of Nepal was hence to go revert to their normal lives again.

*The government is very conscious about trying to get back to business as usual and have the rebuilding start. What they are saying is that they don't want people to become dependent on aid, which is a valid point. So they want the people that are in tent cities here to go back to their region, and have shelter there and get back to farming and back to being self-sufficient. They want to avoid reliance on aid. Also they don't want the marketplace flooded with a lot of imported material. They want to local economy and markets to ramp up to meet the demand of the locals.*

UNOCHA representative

When we visited Nepal we saw clear signs of resilience in both the urban area of Kathmandu as well as the more remote areas of Rasuwa and Nuwakot. For example, we saw that in some remote villages in Rasuwa people had not waited for external aid to arrive but had instead started to rebuild their houses and construct temporary shelters using materials scavenged from collapsed structures and corrugated galvanized iron (CGI) sheets from earlier humanitarian operations in the area. From our informal conversations with the local people there we learned that frequent floods and landslides had taught people to rely on their own ingenuity and skills when faced with very challenging circumstances.

*The people do not sit idle in those places. They indeed can no longer wait for the agencies to come and bring the CGI sheets. So whichever, timber or CGI, they will use it. They already made a temporary shelter, which is fine for us. So in that case the government is also encouraging them to make the houses. That is fine.*

Cordaid representative

Be this as it may, resilience does not mean that communities can handle any and all levels of adversity life throws their way. As resilient as people are, there is a point at which basic assistance can make the difference between coping with the aftermath of a disaster and not being able to pull through.

*Very soon we start talking about long term. Sometimes too soon, because now the government said: relief is over, it is now all about reconstruction. That has a huge implication. For instance, they are not allowing the importation of goods that are relief goods, because we are not in relief phase any more. Although we know that coverage has not been 100%. People are going back. The monsoon is coming; they need waterproof support. They are extremely resilient, but that minimum input that needs to be there. The winter is coming. So it is that sequence, the calendar, and the weather. It is just very complicated. In any, any country you never see housing reconstruction start earlier than one year after the disaster.*

IOM representative

The end of the duty-free period for humanitarian goods limited what humanitarian agencies could import and distribute on the ground. As such, this government decision limited organizations' options in terms of aid provision. At the time the government announced this formal shift, many badly hit remote communities had not yet received any assistance at all even though they faced the imminent threat of the monsoon rains. The reinstatement of import tax on relief items significantly restricted how much – and how quickly – the humanitarian community could act in order to address these needs. As such, the distribution of aid did not reflect the degree of suffering on the ground, but rather the combined impact of space and time: the geography of the country and a major policy change. Therefore, shifting the formal phase of the relief operation had a great influence on the capacity of the humanitarian relief organizations to address the vulnerabilities, and support the resilience of the affected communities.



Picture 10. Resilient people and communities.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In this paper we looked at the dilemmas of coordination (i.e. the synchronization of actions) and cooperation (i.e. the working together) between the various responding organizations, governmental bodies and local communities in Nepal, and how these organizations coped with the dilemmas. Coordination appeared to be difficult because of the heterogeneity of the responding organizations and the complexity of the local governmental structures. At the same time, incoming responding organizations had to coordinate their actions and collaborate with other organizations and local communities.

The first dilemma we faced had to do with *top-down versus emergent coordination*. The humanitarian response organizations in Nepal had to find a balance between established coordination mechanisms implemented by UNOCHA, imposed collaboration efforts between various NGOs and local, emergent response initiatives. An example we reported on in this paper is coordination mechanism implemented via the Dutch Relief Alliance, a coalition of twelve humanitarian organizations with links to the Netherlands. While stimulating organizations to develop a joint response strategy to disasters through the DRA was an appropriate coordination mechanism within the Dutch context, this was not necessarily the case in the field. Drawing conclusions about the usefulness of DRA as local coordination mechanism is premature, given its recent establishment; however, it is worth critically considering whether it makes sense to ask Dutch NGOs to work together in an international setting – and if so, how this could be achieved.

The second dilemma we faced was *imposed versus optional cooperation*. Responding organizations had to work with local (governmental) organizations and communities, but were faced with the problem that local government officials and emergent leaders were stretched to the limit in their capacity to respond to the crisis. Besides, these local actors were also motivated by their own political agendas. In this paper we provide the example of providing aid to Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps. IDP camps are a politically sensitive issue at times of disasters and in this regard Nepal is no exception. The collaborating response organizations had to find a balance between providing aid to IDP camps and accommodating the interests of local politicians, given that aid to IDP camps could alter the geographical representation of political parties and their political influence within the coalition government.

We found that, given the dynamic nature of the crisis setting in Nepal, relief organizations were in constant need to improvise coordination and cooperation in order to deal with new and unexpected circumstances thus reinventing coordination and cooperation mechanisms in action. They acted in the spirit of a slogan we saw on the wall in one of the logistical centres: “*When nothing goes right, go left, and everything matters*”.



*Picture 11: lessons learned at the Logistics Department of the WFP, Kathmandu*



## Recommendations

**Coordination: when introducing a new coordination mechanism into a humanitarian context where several already exist – ensure that all parties are clear on its intended added value.**

Donor-imposed coordination mechanisms need to add value in a humanitarian crisis context. In order for the mechanism to be effective, it is essential that the coordination aims are communicated unequivocally, and also make sense in the context in which the partner NGOs operate. This requires regular contact and the ‘translation’ of information by all parties into terms that make sense to people who operate in a different environment and have different expertise.

This work could be undertaken by staff who are familiar with not just their own context and professional background, but that of the donor and/or other partners as well, who can act as ‘interpreters’. Moreover, regular communication can reduce the risk of coordination failure and limit unnecessary overhead, thereby availing time and resources for NGOs to invest in the strategically most useful coordination efforts, and including organizations not necessarily part of the donor imposed mechanism.

**Narratives: actively monitor – and counter – dominant narratives that could be used to justify policy decisions that undermine the humanitarian response**

During the response to the earthquake in Nepal, we encountered different stories about the nature of the ongoing humanitarian operations. Many positive stories emerged about the organization of the relief work, while more critical stories illustrated the challenges that NGOs and government bodies faced. These stories were not neutral and were selectively used to legitimize the different strategies of key actors. For instance, the government decision to move from response to recovery phase, ending the duty-free period for humanitarian goods, was based on the dominant narrative of local resilience and the risk of the population becoming dependent on aid. Although there is certain value in this perspective, the timing of the decision undermined the ongoing relief work undertaken by humanitarian organizations. When we visited Nepal, the view that many people still required aid was primarily voiced within the humanitarian community. Before the government made its decision, little had been done to publicly challenge the dominant narrative that the government used to justify its choice.

Humanitarian agencies in Nepal might have been able to delay the government’s decision if they had proactively countered the narrative the government used to legitimize this choice. As such, the monitoring of national and local media for potentially harmful narratives – and the proactive countering of such narratives – should be a priority of nationally based communications staff.

<b>Reflective leadership: work directly with emergent community leaders – but check who they represent</b>
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Humanitarian organizations often (have to) work through local political structures, such as local government bodies or (emergent) community leaders. Given that these structures tend to embody local socio-economic inequalities and exclusions, the relief efforts carried out by these humanitarian agencies may end up reflecting local biases and blind spots. Groups that are absent from official registers may also get excluded from relief and recovery programs. In order to address this issue NGOs sometimes try to complement official data with data directly obtained from the affected communities. To this end, they often turn to (emergent) community leaders and use them as focal points. Whilst both official data and information provided by these leaders may reflect biases and blind spots, having two distinct sources of information enables triangulation (to some extent).

In order to optimize this approach and ensure that vulnerable individuals unintendedly are not neglected, it is key to verify the scope of (emergent) community leaders' networks so as to be clear about who are represented by these individuals and who are not – and to identify other (emergent) leaders that represent subgroups within a community that are not linked to the focal points the organization already works with.

## Future Research

During the next three years, the NWO “Smart Disaster Governance” Research Team at VU Amsterdam will continue our research into humanitarian crisis management in close collaboration with our consortium partners. We will examine the challenges humanitarian responders face in their efforts to foster societal resilience and respond to major crises by specifically looking at issues related to coordination, cooperation and information sharing between different actors in humanitarian disaster settings. Our aim is to assess the potential of a bottom-up humanitarian response, in which emergent grassroots community networks play a central role, and how they are related to formal command and control practices and international coordination mechanisms such as the UNOCHA cluster system and the DRA. Our focus, then, will be on the (potential) role of physical – and virtual – community networks in the coordination of relief and recovery efforts, looking specifically at their (potential) role in the creation and sharing of local crisis information.

In this NWO project, we will combine qualitative research (e.g. interviews, shadowing, observations) with social media analytics as well as social network analysis. We are currently planning a follow-up research field trip to Nepal in the spring of 2016 in order to expand our data set on the response to the 2015 earthquakes.

# Acronyms

ACAPS: Assessment Capacities Project

ALNAP: Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance

CGI: Corrugated Galvanized Iron

DRA: Dutch Relief Alliance

IDP: Internally Displaced Person

ICT: Information and Communication Technology

IOM: International Organization for Migration

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

NGHA: Non-Governmental Humanitarian Agency

NWO: Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research

UN(OCHA): United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

UMN: United Mission to Nepal

KLL: Kathmandu Living Labs

VDC: Village Development Committee

WFP: World Food Programme

## About the Research Team

Fieldwork was carried out by:

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- **Kenny Meesters**, MSc, researcher in Information Management at Tilburg University, ICT developer and consultant for Cordaid ([k.meesters@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:k.meesters@tilburguniversity.edu)). His research focuses on the inclusion of locally generated information in the decision making process at formal organizations and on how ICTs can be used to empower local communities.
- **Hossein Baharmand**, MSc, PhD research fellow at the University of Agder, Centre for Integrated Emergency Management ([hossein.baharmand@uia.no](mailto:hossein.baharmand@uia.no)). His research focuses on humanitarian logistics and distribution plan models.

Long-distance research support during fieldwork was provided by:

- Dr. **Julie Ferguson**, prof. dr. **Peter Groenewegen** and prof. dr. **Bartel van de Walle**, members (co-applicants) of the NWO Smart Disaster Governance project. They have been involved in the design of the project and in preparing the fieldwork trip to Nepal.

## Disclaimers

This is a *White Paper* to inform a broader audience about the complex coordination and governance issues during the early response phase after the earthquakes in Nepal, in April/May 2015. This paper is work-in-progress and part of the outcomes of a larger research project into disaster governance – and in particular the disaster response in Nepal. In this paper we provide a first impression of the kind of data we collected, and only draw temporal conclusions.

Pictures are taken by the authors, except for the maps.

The authors hold the copyrights of this paper.

Respondents’ names are anonymized.

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<sup>13</sup> Boersma, F.K., J. Ferguson, P. Groenewegen and J. Wolbers (2014). Beyond the Myth of Control: toward network switching in disaster management. In: *Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> International ISCRAM Conference* – Penn State, S.R. Hiltz, M.S. Pfaff, L. Plotnick, and A.C. Robinson (eds).